

## Improving English Speaking Fluency: The Role of Six Factors

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history

Received: September 12, 2017

Accepted: November 08, 2017

Published: December 30, 2017

Volume: 8 Issue: 6

Advance access: December 2017

Conflicts of interest: None

Funding: None

#### Key words:

EFL,

Speaking,

Fluency

### ABSTRACT

This qualitative study, using an open interview, set out to investigate the roles six factors, including age, university education, teachers of English Language institutes, teaching English, dictionary, and note-taking, played in improving English speaking fluency of seventeen fluent Iranian EFL speakers. The participants were chosen purposefully based on the speaking scale of Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFRL). The findings indicated that early age had a great impact on the participants' speaking fluency. They mentioned that they could not pick up fluency if they had started learning English at older ages. Moreover, university education had no effect on enhancing their fluency. They stated that not having enough opportunities to speak English in classrooms, being exposed to wrong amounts of input from their classmates or even from some university instructors, having no access to English native speakers in English Language Departments, professors' talking in native language out of classes, in their offices or even sometimes in classes all led to their losing motivation after entering the university. In contrast, teachers in English language institutes had a supportive role in increasing the participants' English learning. Although two participants quit teaching English since it had a negative influence on their speaking, it had a positive impact on improving speaking ability of the rest. And finally, fruitful strategies were suggested on how to use dictionaries and note-takings.

### INTRODUCTION

English is the language which connects people from different regions, cultures, religions, and nations. Brown and Lee (2015) claim that "English is increasingly being used as a tool for interaction among nonnative speakers" (p. 163). Among the four language skills, speaking seems to play more important role in communication (Zaremba, 2006). Chastain (1988) views speaking "as one important element in developing each language skill and conveying culture knowledge" (p. 271). Considering the significance of accuracy, more attention is drawn to fluency in achieving communicative purposes in conversations.

Richards (2006) points out that fluency is the use of naturally occurring language when a speaker engages and maintains in meaningful communication. This communication would be comprehensible and ongoing in spite of limitations in one's communicative competence. To Fillmore (1979, as cited in Nation, 1989, p. 377), a fluent speaker knows what to say and how to say without frequent pauses to think. In addition, Harmer (2015) mentions that fluency refers to focusing on the content of speech to communicate as effectively as possible. Furthermore, Baily (2003) defines fluency as using language quickly and confidently, with limited hesitations, unnatural pauses, etc.

### Objective of the Study

Regarding the problems L2 speakers face in developing their speaking fluency, the current study was carried out to delve into the roles six factors may play in developing English speaking fluency. Hence, the research question was:

- What is the role of age, university education, teachers of English language institutes, teaching English, dictionary, and note taking in improving English speaking fluency?

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Bahrani (2011) studied the effects of technology in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context and social interaction in English as a second language (ESL) context on speaking fluency. After using an International English Language Testing System (IELTS) speaking fluency test as a pretest, those participants in Iran and Malaysia whose scores were one standard deviation above and below the mean were selected. Forty Iranian participants as EFL learners and forty Malaysian participants as ESL learners were chosen for the study. The EFL learners in Iran had exposure to audio/visual mass media and the ESL learners in Malaysia had exposure to social interaction context. Both types of exposure occurred in informal settings. The experiment lasted for one year. Then

both EFL and ESL participants took IELTS speaking fluency test as a posttest. The results of pre- and posttests were analyzed and compared. The findings of the research revealed that exposure to audio/visual mass media improved fluency in speaking more than the social interaction. It was also concluded that authentic source of input could lead to speaking fluency development.

The aim of the study done by Amirnejad (2015) was to identify the impact of cell phone video recordings on the speaking fluency of the Iranian EFL learners. Forty learners at the elementary level of instruction who were selected based on a placement test participated in the study. They were divided randomly into experimental and control groups with 20 learners in each. Both groups had to attend their normal classes; however, the learners in the EG had to make 15 monologue videos by their cell phones for about 30 seconds to one minute as part of their homework. They video recorded themselves talking on the topics with which they were familiar. They were asked to video-record themselves as many times as they wished until they felt satisfied with the recording in which they seemed to be fluent. The final videos were sent to the researcher via Bluetooth. The comparison between the results of both pre-treatment and post-treatment interviews revealed that self-video recording had a great impact both on the learners' fluency and on their rate of speech.

Tavakoli, Campbell, and McCormack (2016) conducted a study to examine the effects of a short-term pedagogic intervention on learners' L2 speech fluency development. They carried out the study with 37 learners of English for

Academic Purposes (EAP) at the language center of a university in the United Kingdom. Two groups were selected as experimental and control, with 19 and 18 participants in each group, respectively. The EG and CG were taught by two different teachers. Although the participants were studying in the target language context, they received the instruction focusing on improving their L2 skill. Both the EG and CG engaged in listening and speaking activities. However, the EG received the pedagogic intervention, including raising awareness of fluency, teaching strategies for fluency improvement and providing opportunities for practicing the strategies not only in class, but also outside class. The treatment lasted for four weeks, with two 15- to 20-minute instructional sessions per week. The pre- and posttest were given one week before the experiment started and the day after the intervention ended. The participants had to plan their monologue for one minute and then to perform it for one minute. The tasks were similar in structure, but containing different topics. The pre- and posttest were recorded digitally, transcribed and then coded. According to the result of the research, studying L2 in the target language context with the help of effective pedagogic intervention can improve speech fluency.

## METHOD

### Participants

In this qualitative research, purposive sampling was used to choose the participants based on a) their English-speaking

fluency and b) not having been abroad but being successful in developing their speaking fluency as EFL speakers in their own country. The participants were both English language teachers in English language institutes and EFL learners in an English language department in Shiraz, Iran. Based on data saturation, 17 participants (7 females and 10 males) including six EFL teachers holding Bachelor of Arts (B.A.) and Master of Arts (M.A.) degree and 11 EFL learners in B.A. and M.A. degree took part in the study. Their ages were in the range of 19 to 55 years.

## Instruments

### CEFR Scale

To select the participants, the researchers asked the English language instructors in English language institutes and the English language department to introduce the most fluent speakers of English. To do so, the Speaking Rubric Scale from the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) Published by Council of Europe (2001) was utilized. This scale contains five factors including range, accuracy, fluency, interaction, and coherence. It describes foreign language proficiency at three main levels, namely, basic users of a language, independent users, and proficient users. Each category is divided into two subcategories of A1 and A2, B1 and B2, and C1 and C2. The participants were selected based on levels C1 and C2 with advanced speaking skills.

### Interview

An open interview with a question made based on the objective of the study was used to collect the data. The upcoming questions were formulated based on the answers provided by the participants.

## Data Collection and Data Analysis Procedure

Before the main interview started, a pilot study was done in several sessions with three participants. The interviews in the main study were done in Persian so that the participants would feel more comfortable in sharing their views. Each interview, which was carried out individually, lasted about two hours. The participants' voices were audio-recorded, transcribed, analyzed, and then translated into English. By using peer debriefing, the credibility of data was obtained. The dependability (consistency) of the data was achieved by coding agreement. The inter-coder reliability was found to be 0.95. Finally, the obtained results were descriptively reported.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As to the first factor, most of the participants mentioned that age had a great impact on their fluency. They stated that since they began learning English around nine, they learned it unconsciously similar to the way children learn their mother tongue. They also added that learning English at early ages provided them with more input than those who began learn-

ing it later. Most of them also stated that they could not have become fluent speakers if they had started learning English at older ages. Participant 16 in this respect said

The secret of my success is that I learned English when I was a kid.

Or participant 7 stated

I could be more fluent if I had started learning English earlier.

The above quotes corroborate Chastain's view (1988) who believes age is a considerable factor in language learning. The importance of the role of age in language learning may refer to what has been claimed by Penfield and Roberts (1959) and Lenneberg (1967) who view that there is a critical period for language acquisition that continues until puberty. To Shumin (2002, p. 205), "adult learners do not seem to have the same innate language-specific endowment or propensity as children for acquiring fluency and naturalness in spoken language." Therefore, unlike McLaughlin (1987) and Snow (1983) who believe that older age is appropriate for language learning, the findings of this study is in compliance with what Krashen (1981) says about the appropriateness of the early age for language learning.

Regarding the second factor, university education had no impact on the participants' speaking fluency because they did not have enough opportunity to speak English in their classes. What some said in this line were:

University is not a good place to improve your speaking fluency... and it is better to learn English in institutes than in universities. (Participant 8)

Here in our department, very few students speak English in classes, so I will lose my fluency if I do not practice it by myself. (Participant 1)

Furthermore, some participants mentioned they lost their motivation after entering university. For example:

I was shocked as I entered the English Department. I expected all to talk in English. But...!! (Participant 12)

I became disappointed as I realized I had to practice English by myself. (Participant 2)

On the other hand, they had been exposed to wrong amounts of input from their classmates or even a few university instructors. According to participant 16

Unfortunately, a few university instructors' accent and fluency are not satisfactory. We are exposed to mispronunciation of words.

They were also dissatisfied because there was no English native speaker in the English Language Department. In addition, they complained that most instructors did not speak English out of classes and in their offices. The added that even, sometimes, some would talk in Persian in their classes. As participant 5 said

Some of our university instructors act as if they are on an English theater stage. When the class time ends, they shift into Persian.

On the contrary, English teachers in institutes (the third factor) had a great influence on their English learning. These teachers' supportive roles and their personalities had led to the participants' good feelings and attitudes towards English language teachers. Some participants believed that they

learned better because of their good feelings towards their teachers:

English teachers have a significant role in increasing learners' motivation and their learning. Fortunately, my first teacher was great. (Participant 6)

My first English teacher was very encouraging. She gave me stickers when I answered the questions correctly and that affected my motivation greatly. (Participant 9)

I was shy and did not talk in my classes, but the good, warm, and lovely behavior of my teacher made me become self-confident and talk a lot. ...the role of English teachers is dramatically highlighted in children and teenagers' classes because they have complete trust in their teachers. (Participant 10)

My teachers were my role models. They also pushed me to improve myself. They told me I was different and talented, and that increased my self-esteem which led to putting a lot of effort into improving my knowledge of English and mainly my speaking ability. (Participant 13)

In addition, some highlighted the role of their teachers who were English native speakers or who had lived in English speaking countries for a long time. Participants 4 and 3, respectively, unveiled that

One of my teachers had lived in England for a long time and was a near-native English speaker. His accent made me interested in learning English and improve my speaking.

Getting familiar and having class with an English teacher was a turning point in my learning English.

Concerning the fourth factor, with the exception of a few, some participants who were English language teachers asserted that teaching English had positively influenced their speaking fluency especially at advanced levels. The said that since the classes were demanding, class preparation had a great effect on boosting their fluency:

Teaching has a crucial role and I learn better when I teach. (Participant 9)

Teaching is the best means of learning and it is an effective learning mechanism because first you should learn to be able to teach. (Participant 13)

Teaching forces me to improve myself and class preparation automatically makes me improve my speaking. (Participant 12)

Teaching has influenced my fluency, though it has had more impact on my speaking accuracy. (Participant 17)

Teaching has a positive impact on my learning. It has forced me to study more carefully and work harder. It has also led to my improvisation. (Participant 8)

However, participants 2 and 1 emphasized that they quit teaching since it had a negative effect on their speaking:

My speaking ability got worse cause I had to use limited words and simple sentences in lower levels.

Errors made by the students had negative drawbacks on my fluency. Prior to teaching in preliminary levels, I spoke English fluently, but after that I had lots of problems to speak English fluently.

As concerns the fifth factor, two types of dictionaries, as the main sources of improving the participants' vocab-

ulary, were suggested by all of them: printed (e.g. *Oxford Elementary* and *Advanced Learner's Dictionary*) and electronic (e.g. *Babylon* for Windows and *BlueDict* for Android). To them, using printed dictionaries was more useful because they could have access to several words at the same time on different pages. It also helped them keep the words in mind longer since they spent more time reading the definitions and examples in printed pages. On the other hand, some stated that electronic dictionaries on computers or cell phones made it easier and faster to look up words, especially in the midst of a movie, news programs, etc. Furthermore, all stated that they used dictionaries to check both the definitions of words and the examples provided. Moreover, memorizing the examples helped them enormously build up their fluency. As the following participants said

Dictionary is a reliable source. (Participant 15)

It is not just a dictionary. It is everything. (Participant 13)

Dictionary is my ultimate resort. It is like the word of God. As the most reliable source, I check everything in it. (Originally said in English by participant 2)

The statements support the idea of Rivers (1981) and Harmer (2015), who emphasize the role of using dictionaries, whether monolingual or bilingual, in language learning.

And finally, in relation to the sixth factor, the importance of note taking, the majority of the participants had their own notebooks. They said that they would write down new words, expressions, etc. or whatever seemed useful and appealing in their notebooks. Regarding keeping notebooks, Brown and Lee (2015) believe that "an effective way to encourage word-learning is to urge students to use *vocabulary notebooks* to enter new words, and to review them daily, once they identify their learning goals" (p. 484). According to Nation and Newton (2009, p. 52), note-taking has two functions: "it stores information for later use, and it provides the opportunity to encode information." As they said, definitions, sentences, and examples were reviewed every night and morning before and after sleeping. A number of them were asked to show their notebooks to the researchers. The following points are the most interesting features of their note taking and notebooks:

- The notebooks were small and light so that they could carry them without difficulty wherever they would go.
- The name of the movies, programs, novels, etc., from which the words, expressions, collocations, etc. were extracted, had been written with their related contexts and quotations at the top of the pages. Some of them also had written the date and time of coming across the words, expressions, etc. It helped them remember those written parts better.
- They had written those words, expressions, idioms, etc. which were more practical. In other words, active vocabularies had been written more than the passive ones.
- The dictionary definitions had been written along with the sentences in which they were used because they believed that seeing a word, expression, etc. in a sentence could provide more and richer contexts. In fact, it can enhance meaningful learning as introduced by Ausubel (1968).

- Colored pens were used to help them remember the meanings longer.
- Some pictures were drawn next to some words by those who were mostly visual learners.

## CONCLUSIONS

Based on the findings, it can be concluded that early age had a great impact on the participants' speaking fluency. They mentioned that they could not pick up fluency if they had started learning English at older ages. Moreover, university education had no effect on enhancing their fluency. They stated that not having enough opportunities to speak English in classrooms, being exposed to wrong amounts of input from their classmates or even from some university instructors, having no access to English native speakers in English Language Departments, professors' talking in native language out of classes, in their offices or even sometimes in classes all led to their losing motivation after entering the university. In contrast, teachers in English language institutes had a supportive role in increasing the participants' English learning. Although two participants quit teaching English since it had a negative influence on their speaking, it had a positive impact on improving speaking ability of the rest.

## IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

One of the practical results of the paper is that if L2 speakers want to speak a particular language fluently, they should start learning it at early ages. Moreover, children's parents should be advised to encourage their children to learn L2 in childhood. Another implication is that more attention should be paid to teaching English in English language departments and both teachers and students should be required to talk English in and out of classes. It also seems necessary for the English language departments to invite native speaker instructors to English departments. Besides, learners should be taught how to use dictionaries and take notes. Additionally, the language learners can be encouraged to teach while learning because preparation for teaching may help them improve their speaking fluency. And finally, the EFL learners can find the tips listed on note taking fruitful.

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